POLITICAL WORKING LIVES
The experiences of those working at the heart of UK politics
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Acknowledgements

We thank all the MPs and staff who took the time to respond to our survey. Their feedback and reflections are essential in helping us understand and improve the culture of working life in Parliament.

We also wish to thank the Speaker of the House of Commons the Rt Hon Lindsay Hoyle MP and the Members’ Services Team for supporting and facilitating this research. We reiterate our desire to work with them and other relevant authorities to create the best working environment conceivable for MPs and their staff.
Executive summary

This report examines what it is like to work on the front line of politics. Drawing on data from a survey of MPs and their staff, the report outlines the challenges presented by working in this unique environment to understand what changes in working arrangements, people management practices and support could improve people’s job quality and wellbeing.

The report has a significant focus on understanding the nature and sources of conflict in the workplace (including harassment and bullying) to help provide more insights on its causes, how well it is addressed and what might be done to improve the system going forward.

Key findings

Strong motivation and relationships of those working in Parliament
- Consistently high levels of respondents agree or strongly agree that their work is useful (90% agree), is useful to society (86% agree) and important (85% agree). Three quarters (77%) agreed they were highly motivated to do their work.
- There is an overall positive relationships between people in management positions and their employees. When asked to rate their relationship with their boss or immediate line manager or supervisor, 84% rated this relationship as good or very good.
- Relationships between colleagues also scored highly with 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing they enjoyed working with colleagues.

Workloads, work-life balance and pressure are cause for concern
- Nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents agree or strongly agree they are unable to meet commitments outside of work because of time spent on the job, while 47% disagree. Over half (51%) say that they find it difficult to switch off and relax in their personal time, while 39% disagree with this.
- On all measures of work-life balance in the survey women report much more negative scores than men. For example they are much more likely to agree they find it difficult to meet their commitments outside of work because of the time they spend on their job and they find it harder than men to switch off from work and relax in their spare time.

Health, wellbeing and safety
- Almost four in ten (38%) told us that their work has a negative or very negative effect on their mental health compared with 28% who said it had a positive or very positive effect.
- There is a culture of presenteeism in Parliament, where people are attending work whilst being unwell. Just under three-fifths (56%) of respondents told us they had attended work despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties, with a third (34%) saying they had not done so.
- Women working for MPs are much more likely than men to say work has a negative impact on both their mental health and physical health.
- Respondents feel safe or very safe when in Westminster, but less so when working in public. 85% of respondents feel safe in the secure Palace of Westminster, but this drops to seven-tenths (71%) in public. Women are twice as likely to feel unsafe (35%) as men (18%)

Conflict
- There is a high incidence of conflict in our respondents’ jobs, with one-third (33%) of people experiencing it in the past 12 months.
• The most common forms of conflict were respondents being undermined or humiliated in their jobs, with more than one-fifth (22%) of respondents saying this had happened. The other most common forms were shouting or very heated arguments (12%) while one-tenth exactly (10%) reported false allegations made against them and verbal abuse or insults (10%).

• Having experienced conflict in the past 12 months has a very negative effect on our respondents’ working lives. They are much more likely to tell us that they feel miserable at work, with three-in-ten (29%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this state of mind compared with just 4% of people who haven’t experienced conflict.

• Concerningly, two-thirds (67%) of these incidents of conflict go unresolved.

Support
• Of the three forms of support that workers in Parliament could access, the most used was the confidential support system. The independent HR system was ranked most effective, with 85% of those who used it told us it had helped a great deal or a fair amount. This fell to 64% of those who had used the confidential support, and 50% of the independent complaints procedure

Management structure and HR practices
• Some key HR and people management practices appear to be lacking for many respondents. Only a quarter (23%) received an induction when starting the job and less than half (44%) having clear written objectives or targets to meet.
• Offices with a designated office manager are more likely to have these in place. For example, almost half (49%) in an office with a manager have clear objectives compared with a third (33%) who report directly to the Member.
• Respondents who underwent an induction when they started are less likely to say they often or always feel under excessive pressure, with three-tenths (29%) saying this is the case compared with just under two-fifths (37%) who didn’t. This is also the case when saying they often or always feel exhausted, with 28% reporting this if they were inducted compared with 38% if they weren’t.
• Those with a job description are also more likely to say their workload is about right, with three-quarters (76%) having a job description and one-fifth (19%) not. Of those who tell us their work is too much or far too much, the proportion with a job description falls to 64% with one-third (32%) not having one.

Relationships between MPs in different parties and long vs short term goals
• The survey highlighted that there is widespread suspicion of MPs in other parties, with 71% of respondents saying it was true or mostly true that people are suspicious of MPs in other parties compared with their own, while 29% said it was false.
• There are mixed opinions with regard to perceptions about the level of conflict between MPs. 54% said it was true that there was little conflict while 46% said it was false.
• When asked whether MPs in different parties are prepared to share information 43% said this was true while 57% said this was false. However, 62% said it was true that when MPs in different parties collaborate it is effective with 38% saying it was false.
• We found a preference for longer term performance and pay-offs over short term. Only 21% told us that short term results should be achieved, even if this means forgoing long-term payoffs. However, 35% disagreed.
• Two-fifths (38%) agreed they were willing to sacrifice short-term results for expected long-term payoffs. 16% disagreed.
Background and context

The purpose of this report is to explore the challenges that working in politics presents to staff and MPs and, crucially, to understand the changes that might be required to working practices, people management, culture, and support to create a compassionate, inclusive, and empowering working environment.

The report focuses not only on the “nuts and bolts” of working life – HR support, job descriptions, training, management – but also explores issues of conflict, harassment and bullying. It seeks to understand how the pressure of political work impacts on the health, wellbeing and relationships of those who practice it. And it looks at the way the combative nature of British politics affects the way political work is conducted.

This report provides an overview of key findings based on initial analysis of the survey data and is designed to inform discussion and input into a more comprehensive final report.

The data analysis includes comparison with data from the CIPD’s annual Good Work Index survey (previously the UK Working Lives survey) which is an annual survey of about 6,000 working people which is weighted to be representative of the working population in the UK.

In total, 315 people took part in the survey; 18 MPs and 297 staff. The percentages from each party are shown in Figure 1. In all, 3% were from other parties which we have anonymised to avoid being able to identify respondents. The relatively small sample limited the ability to examine beyond gender differences in terms of exploring respondents’ individual characteristics and diversity.

63% of respondents were women, 34% men and the rest identified in another way or preferred not to disclose their gender.

Figure 1: Respondents by political party (%)

- Conservative
- Labour
- SNP
- Lib Dem
- Other

Base: 315
Location
35% of respondents spend the majority of their time in Parliament when it is sitting, with 56% spending the majority of their time in the constituency. The remaining 9% are split equally between the two.

Management responsibility
One-in-three (33%) of respondents report they manage or supervise a fellow member of staff; 18% say they do some of the time, which may be when the office takes on interns or apprentices. Just under half (49%) do not have management responsibility.
**Office set up – management structure and total number of staff**

Almost three-quarters (74%) of those surveyed report that their office has a designated office manager whilst 25% said that staff report directly to the Member.

![Figure 4: Does your office have a designated office manager or Chief of Staff or do staff report directly to the Member? (%)](image)

*Base: 298.*

More than two-fifths (42%) of offices have a total of six or more members of staff, while 30% have five and 18% have four. Seven per cent (7%) of offices have three members of staff.

![Figure 5: How many staff make up your office, both in Westminster and constituency? (%)](image)

*Base: 315.*
Motivation, purpose and relationships with managers

- People working in Parliament are proud of the work they do, are highly motivated and have a keen sense of duty
- Relationships within MPs’ offices tend to be very positive, particularly between managers/supervisors and direct reports
- Respondents also enjoy working with their colleagues

Highly motivated staff and a strong sense of duty
The survey shows clearly that Parliamentary workers are highly motivated and have a strong sense of the importance of their work. Consistently high levels agree with the statements that their work is useful (90% agree), is useful to society (86% agree) and important (85% agree). In all, 96% of respondents believe they have a duty in their role to do the best they can and 77% agree they are highly motivated to do their work. There was little difference in the responses between men and women.

Furthermore, people working in Parliament are much more likely to agree with these statements compared with respondents in the CIPD’s 2021 Good Work Index. For example, just 51% of respondents from this representative nationwide sample of working people agree that their work is useful to society, while 50% agreed that they are highly motivated to do their work.

Strong relationships in the workplace
Another encouraging finding is the overall positive relationships between people in management positions and their employees. Respondents report that relationships between management/line managers or supervisors and their staff within individual offices tend to be strong. They score highly on the following:

Figure 6: Do you agree or disagree or disagree that your manager: (%)

In addition, when asked to rate their relationship with their boss or immediate line manager or supervisor, 84% of staff rated this relationship as good or very good, marginally higher
than the four-fifths (79%) in the CIPD’s Good Work Index 2021. Only 7% rated it poor or very poor.

When respondents were asked whether or not their manager or boss would hold a mistake against them, just 13% agreed. In comparison, almost three quarters (74%) disagreed.

This positive attitude on the part of employees is reciprocated, with 84% of managers reporting their relationship with their direct reports as good or very good and only 1% rating it as poor.

Relationships between colleagues also scored highly with 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing they enjoyed working with colleagues. This was higher than the three-quarters (77%) reported in the CIPD’s Good Work Index 2021.

**Workload, pressure and work-life balance**

- High numbers say they struggle with their work commitments and these have a negative impact on their work-life balance
- Almost half of respondents are unable to complete their work in their allocated hours and find it difficult to relax when not at work.
- Female staff find it harder to find a good work-life balance than their male counterparts
- There is a lot of flexibility available to jobs in members’ offices, although more in the constituencies than Westminster

**Lack of work-life balance is concerning**

While there are clearly positive aspects of working for MPs, the survey highlights areas where there is cause for concern. These include work-life balance, workload and pressure, despite the availability of flexible working arrangements for many respondents.

**Availability of flexible working**

The availability of flexibility is a positive aspect highlighted by the survey. Almost four-fifths (79%) of respondents report they find it easy to arrange to take an hour or two off work to take care of personal or family matters. This is higher than the CIPD’s Good Work Index 2021 survey in which 63% reported it was easy to do so.

Just under three-fifths (59%) of respondents said they had used flexi-time (where they were able to choose their start and finish times) in the past 12 months, considerably higher than the 33% reported in CIPD’s Good Work Index 2021. Just 14% said they were able to choose to do this but they did not, while 19% reported it isn’t available to them. In all, 82% said they had worked from home in the past 12 months, however this is unsurprising given COVID-19 restrictions.

**Perceptions of work-life balance**

Despite available flexibility for many of those working for MPs, our survey shows some concerning findings about how respondents feel about their ability to balance work and home commitments. Nearly 38% of respondents agree they are unable to meet commitments outside of work because of time spent on the job, while 47% disagree. Worryingly, 51% agree they find it difficult to relax in their personal time, while 39% disagree.

These finding are more negative than the results from the 2020 CIPD Good Work Index, which was the last time these questions were asked. That survey showed that on average
just 24% of UK employees say they are unable to meet commitments outside work, while just 23% say they find it difficult to relax in their personal time.

**Female respondents struggle more with work-life balance**

Overall our survey shows that women working in Westminster have more of an issue with their work-life balance than their male counterparts. For example, female respondents found it harder to complete their work within their allocated hours. 55% disagreed they were able to do so, with 36% agreeing they could. In comparison, 39% of male respondents disagreed they could get their work done while 48% agreed they were able to get their work done in allocated hours. More than 42% of women also agreed they struggled to fulfil their commitments outside of work because of their job, higher than 33% of men who reported this.

When they did have time away from work, 57% of women told us they find it hard to relax because of their work, compared to the 47% of men who said this was the case.

This lack of work-life balance experienced by many respondents is likely to be closely linked to high workloads described, with many reporting being under excessive pressure often or all the time.
Excessive pressure

More than a third (35%) of staff report they often or always feel under excessive pressure at work, with 32% saying they are rarely or never under pressure. Overall, they are much more likely to report being under excessive pressure than other workers, with CIPD’s 2021 Good Work Index showing that on average just 20% of respondents report being often or always under excessive pressure at work compared with 39% who say this happens rarely or never.

Women (41%) working for MPs are more likely than men (32%) to report being under excessive pressure often or always or to say this happens rarely or never (27% versus 35%).

Pressure can be a good thing and can motivate people to perform better. However, if the pressure people are under is excessive it can make it harder for them to prioritise or make decisions which affects their performance. They may also be more likely to get angry or frustrated which can lead to conflict. It can also impair cognitive functions, making it harder for individuals to prioritise or make decisions. Given the important nature of the decisions MPs and their staff are making, the widespread experience of excessive pressure in politics should be a cause of great concern.

Research also shows that sustained exposure to stress over a long period can be harmful to people’s health and is linked to mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, as well as heart disease. We focus on health and wellbeing in the next section.

Figure 9: How often do you feel this way? (%)

CIPD/CIP Base: 242; Good Work Index 2021 Base: 6,257.
Differences between Westminster and constituency staff

Staff working in Westminster report higher workloads and levels of pressure than their constituency counterparts. Well over half (56%) of Westminster staff told us they have far too much workload compared to just under half (49%) of constituency staff.

Two-fifths (39%) of Westminster respondents report feeling under excessive pressure compared to three-in-ten (29%) constituency staff. They also report that they find it difficult to relax (57%) outside of work which is higher than the 45% of constituency staff. Furthermore, they are considerably more likely to be unable to fulfil personal commitments than those in the constituency – 45% of Westminster staff told us this was the case compared with 30% of constituency staff.

Interestingly, Westminster staff are more likely to report that their work has a positive effect on their mental health. Just under two-fifths (38%) told us their work had a very positive or positive effect on their mental health which was higher than the quarter (23%) of constituency staff.

Constituency staff have more flexibility. Over three-fifths (62%) have made use of flexi-time, while only half (53%) of Westminster staff have done so. They are also considerably more likely to be able to take one to two hours off due to personal or family commitments – almost nine-in-ten (88%) of constituency staff compared with two-thirds (66%) of Westminster staff.
Health, wellbeing and safety

- More than a third of respondents report that work has a negative effect on their mental health
- There is a culture of ‘presenteeism’, where people work when feeling unwell
- Women feel less safe when working in public

Perhaps one of the most concerning findings from our survey is that working in Parliament has a negative impact on many respondents’ mental health. Almost four in ten (38%) told us that their work has a negative or very negative effect on their mental health compared with 28% who said it had a positive or very positive effect. This negative effect is considerably higher than that reported in CIPD’s Good Work Index 2021 survey, which found an average of 25% of workers reported their work had negative effect on their mental health, while 39% said it had a positive effect.

Female respondents working in Parliament were more likely than men to report that their work has a negative impact on their mental health. In all 42% of women said that their work negatively affected their mental health compared with 32% of men who said the same. However, women (26%) were also marginally more likely than men (23%) to report that work has a positive impact on their mental health than men.

In terms of impact on physical health, just one in ten respondents (12%) said their work had a positive effect while well over three-in-ten (35%) told us it had a negative effect. More than half (53%) reported it had neither a positive or negative effect.

These results don’t compare favourably with other workers: an average of 29% of workers said their work has a positive effect on their physical health and 24% said work has a negative effect on their physical health in the 2021 CIPD Good Work survey. Women (39%) working for MPs are significantly more likely than men (29%) to say that their work has a negative effect on their physical health, while just 12% of women and 14% of men report that work has a positive effect on their physical health.

Our survey also indicates that there is a culture of presenteeism in Parliament, where people are attending work whilst being unwell. Just under three-fifths (56%) of respondents told us they had attended work despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties, with a third (34%) saying they had not done so.

Female respondents are considerably more likely to have worked despite not feeling well enough to do so. Two-thirds (66%) of women told us they had worked when unwell compared with two-fifths (39%) of men.

Furthermore, over a third (35%) of respondents told us they always or often feel exhausted, compared with an average of one-in-five (21%) in the CIPD Good Work Index 2021. Less than three-tenths (28%) said they rarely or never feel exhausted which is lower than the 35% reported in the 2021 Good Work Index (see Figure 9).
Safety

- Respondents feel safer on the Parliamentary estate than out in public
- Nearly one-in-three feel unsafe when working in public
- Women feel less safe when out in public than their male counterparts

The survey showed that there is a good sense of safety within the Palace of Westminster. 85% of respondents told us that they feel either very safe or safe whilst on the Parliamentary Estate where there is, of course, armed policing and security on entrances. Only 4% reported they didn’t feel very safe. Interestingly, 11% of respondents said they would prefer not to say.

The results, however, were very different when asked how safe they felt being out in public, whether out in the constituency, attending public events or commuting. The percentage of respondents who reported feeling very safe or safe being out in public dropped to 71%. 22% said they did not feel very safe and 6% said they do not feel very safe at all. Only 2% said they would prefer not to say.

There was a difference in perceptions of safety whilst working in public. 35% of females told us they feel unsafe compared to 18% of males who told us the same. 62% of females told us they do feel safe or very safe which was considerably lower than the 81% of males who told us they feel safe or very safe when out in public.

Figure 10: How physically safe do you feel going about your work in? (%)

- Westminster: Very/fairly safe
  - Male: 85%
  - Female: 81%
  - All: 85%
- Westminster: Not very/not safe at all
  - Male: 2%
  - Female: 8%
  - All: 4%
- Public: Very/fairly safe
  - Male: 62%
  - Female: 71%
  - All: 69%
- Public: Not very/not safe at all
  - Male: 18%
  - Female: 35%
  - All: 28%

Base: 231
Conflict

- There is a high incidence of workers in MPs’ offices experiencing conflict in their jobs, with one-third of people experiencing it
- Two-thirds of conflicts aren’t resolved
- Having experienced conflict in the past 12 months has a very negative effect on our respondents’ working lives
- These respondents are much more likely to tell us they feel miserable at work
- Those reporting conflict find it harder to relax and it affects their relationships with colleagues and managers
- These individuals are much more likely to report that work negatively affects their mental health

Concerningly, one-in-three (33%) respondents report that they have experienced a form of conflict at work in the past 12 months. This is slightly higher than CIPD’s 2019 UK Working Lives report which found that 30% of employees had experienced some conflict in the past year.

Of those who had experienced conflict in the past 12 months, the most commonly reported forms were being undermined or humiliated in their job with 22% of respondents reporting this; 12% reported shouting or very heated arguments while 10% reported false allegations made against them and verbal abuse or insults.
In all, 5% of those who had experienced conflict told us they had been subjected to discrimination due to a protected characteristic. Sadly, we also had instances of unwanted attention of a sexual nature and one case of sexual assault was reported.

The number of respondents who told us that they had been undermined or humiliated in their job or had false allegations made against them were significantly higher than CIPD’s UK Working Lives data.

Concerningly, 66% of incidents of conflict go unresolved. 19% of incidents found in our survey are partially resolved meaning that just 15% of conflicts are fully resolved. See Figure 13 below.
Experiences of those who have had recent conflict at work

It is clear from our survey that the experience of work differs significantly between those who have experienced conflict in the past 12 months and those who have not. Such conflict has an overwhelmingly negative effect on the quality of someone’s working life. Considering that only one-in-three of these incidents have been resolved explains why the conflict continues to have such a negative effect.

Very concerningly, those who have experienced conflict in the past 12 months are much more likely to tell us that they feel miserable at work, with 29% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this state of mind compared with just 4% of people who haven’t experienced conflict.

Almost four-fifths (78%) of those with experience of conflict also agree or strongly agree that they find it hard to relax and almost three-quarters (73%) also agree their workload is too much. A quarter (26%) of people who have experienced conflict also tell us they always or often feel lonely at work.

Experiencing conflict also has an impact on relationships with colleagues and managers, who could be the source of the conflict. One-fifth (19%) of those who have done so disagree or strongly disagree that their manager respects them as a person, while only 2% of those who haven’t had conflict tell us this. In addition, 25% disagree or strongly disagree that their manager is supportive if they have a problem, much higher than 5% who haven’t had conflict reporting this.

Almost three-in-ten (29%) of people who have experienced conflict also disagree with the statement that ‘no one in their team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts’. Only 8% of people who haven’t experienced conflict agree with this statement.

Those who have experienced conflict in the past 12 months are twice as likely to feel unsafe when out in public. 41% told us they don’t feel very safe or not safe at all in public, while 22% haven’t experienced conflict.

Unsurprisingly, 62% of people who have experienced conflict tell us that work has a negative or very negative impact on their mental health, while 26% of others do so. It is clear, therefore, that experiencing conflict is a driver for a lot of the negative experiences our survey found and more action is needed to tackle it.

Conflict and gender

Men and women are almost equally as likely to have experienced a form of conflict in the past 12 months. Women are slightly more likely to have been humiliated or undermined, subject to verbal abuse and insult, intimidation and harassment as well as discriminatory behaviour. Men are more likely to have had false allegations made against them and to have received physical threats. The differences between all of these, however, is small.
Support used

- Of the three forms of support workers in Parliament could access, the most used was the confidential support system
- There are quite high numbers of workers who are unaware of the different forms of support available to them
- An independent HR contact was reported as the most effective form of support available

Respondents were asked about the available forms of support they could access; confidential support for workplace issues, an independent HR contact and an independent complaints procedure for workplace issues. It should be noted that the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, set up in 2017, was not named specifically so some of these may relate to that but we can’t be certain.

The most commonly used support system was a confidential one, used by 18% of respondents. Just 11% said they had used an independent HR contact and 3% reported they had used an independent complaints procedure.

A large number of respondents said they didn’t know about some aspects of support, with over a quarter of respondents not aware of an independent HR contact (28%) or an independent complaints procedure (26%). Fifteen percent (15%) reported they didn’t know about confidential support, although this was the support system that was most known about. These findings suggest that more needs to be done to ensure people know where they can get support.

Figure 14: Have you made use of any of the following in your job, and if not, are they available to you if you needed them? (%)

Of the three systems of support available, the independent HR contact was ranked the most effective by those who had used it. In all, 85% of those who used it told us it had helped a great deal or a fair amount. Just over one-tenth (11%) of those who had used it said it had not helped very much or at all.
In comparison, 64% of those who had used the confidential support said it had helped a great deal or fair amount. This compares with 36% who said it had not helped very much or at all.

The least effective system of support was the independent complaints procedure. This was split exactly with 50% saying it had helped and 50% saying it had not.

**Management structure/HR practices**

- Some key HR and people management practices appear to be lacking for many respondents, such as having an induction when starting their job or having clear written objectives or targets to meet
- Having a designated office manager or Chief of Staff makes it more likely to have these in place
- Initial induction and training, as well as a job description setting out roles and responsibilities when starting a new job, is associated with a better experience of working life
- Respondents who have these are less likely to find it difficult to relax out of work or difficult to fulfil personal commitments
- They are also less likely to feel under excessive pressure or exhausted, leading to better outcomes on mental health

The presence of basic HR practices is associated with enhanced job quality. Our survey suggests that there is a lack of certain people management practices in the offices of the people that took part in the survey. For example, 23% had a structured induction when they first started their job, compared with 75% who did not. Only 44% reported they had specific objectives or targets for them to meet, while 53% do not. Around 69% said they had a clear and up-to-date job description for the role they currently perform while 26% said they did not. This suggests some fundamental people management practices are missing and staff do not necessarily know all of their duties or have set targets to achieve. There is not comparable data from the CIPD’s Good Work Index so we can’t say how this picture compares to the experience of workers more broadly.

**Figure 15: Which of the following did you have when you started working for your current employer? (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear and up-to-date job description</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific objectives or targets</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured induction</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 299.

MPs reported that they were more than twice as likely to have undergone an induction or training when they started their role, with just under half (47%) telling us they did, compared
with one-fifth (22%) of staff. MPs also told us that they believe that such an induction or training should be available, with 69% saying it should be mandatory and the remaining 31% saying it should be voluntary. No MP told us that it should not be provided. It should be noted, however, that this is based on a very small sample size of sixteen (16) that answered this particular question about compulsory or voluntary training.

The findings suggest that having a designated office manager makes it more likely offices will have some of these in place. For example, staff in offices with a designated office manager are more likely to have clear objectives, with 49% reporting they have clear objectives compared with 33% who report directly to the Member. They were also more likely to have had a structured induction programme or training when they started, with 27% having had one and 72% having a job description that is clear and up-to-date. In offices that reported directly to the Member, only 17% had an induction and 61% had a job description outlining their role and responsibilities. Having a designated office manager or Chief of Staff means it’s more likely that better people management practices are in place.

More structure in a constituency office?
Our survey data suggests that there is more structure in the constituency offices of MPs than the Westminster office. This is perhaps unsurprising as the nature of Westminster and Parliament means that business and priorities can constantly change. While that is not to say that doesn’t happen in a constituency, the fact that the Member usually spends Monday-Thursday in Westminster should allow for a more structured week before they travel back to the constituency for the weekend.

Our survey data tells us that constituency offices are more likely to have a designated office manager or Chief of Staff, with 75% of offices having one compared to 64% of Westminster offices. Just under three-in-ten (29%) of Westminster workers report directly to the Member while 20% of constituency staff do so.

Our findings indicate that the people management basics for staff outlined above are more prevalent in constituency offices than in Westminster. For example, those in the constituency office are more likely to have an up-to-date job description, where 72% have one compared to 64% in Westminster. They are also more likely to have written objectives (46%). This is higher than Westminster, where only 36% of staff have them.

Inductions and up-to-date job descriptions are linked to improved working experiences
Our survey shows that respondents’ experience of their work is more positive if they underwent a structured induction or training when they started in their job compared to those employees who did not. Respondents who had an induction are much more likely to have specific objectives or targets to meet, with 66% having these compared to 36% who did not.

Respondents are considerably less likely to tell us they find it difficult to relax when not in work if they had an induction, with 37% telling us this is the case compared to 55% of respondents who didn’t receive one. The proportion of people telling us they can’t fulfil personal commitments due to work also falls if they received one, from 40% to 28%.

Respondents who underwent an induction are also less likely to report they often or always feel under excessive pressure, with 29% saying this is the case compared with just under 37% who didn’t. This is also the case when saying they often or always feel exhausted, with 28% reporting this if they were inducted compared with 38% if they weren’t.

Respondents who were given an induction are also much more likely to report their work has a positive effect on their mental health – 42% say this is the case compared with 23% who didn’t receive one. This is reversed when asked about work having a negative effect. One
quarter (25%) who had an induction report work has a negative effect on their mental health compared to over two-fifths (42%) of those who didn’t.

A job description setting out roles and responsibilities also helps

Our survey tells us that having a job description also contributes to a better work experience. Over a third (35%) of respondents who told us they find it hard to relax in their spare time due to work do not have a job description, more than double the 16% that do have a job description.

Of those who told us they feel exhausted always or often, 64% have a job description, compared to 31% who don’t have one. In comparison, of those who tell us that they rarely or never feel exhausted, 81% have a job description while 12% do not.

Those with a job description are also more likely to say their workload is about right, with 76% having a job description and 19% not. Of those who tell us their work is too much or far too much, the proportion with a job description falls to 64% with 32% not having one.

Of course, the survey can only highlight links between the presence of inductions and job descriptions and more positive attitudes among respondents towards their working experience, and cannot show whether they directly cause these outcomes.

However, the presence of these practices is likely to signal working environments which are more professionally and better managed and the benefits that result from this.

### Relationships between MPs in other parties

- Responses are almost equally divided about the amount of conflict between MPs and whether there is a lot of respect between those in different parties
- There is less suspicion of staff in different parties compared with suspicion of MPs
- Three fifths (62%) of people agreed that cross-party working is effective but felt MPs were less prepared to share information

### Perception of other parties

Respondents to the survey told us that there is a lot of suspicion of MPs in other parties, with 71% saying it was true or mostly true compared with their own party, while 29% said it was false. This is much higher than suspicion felt towards staff in other parties, with 51% saying there was suspicion of staff from other parties.

There are mixed opinions about how the level of conflict between MPs is perceived with 54% saying it was true that there was little conflict and 46% saying it was false. It should be noted that this question did not specify MPs in different parties so perceived conflict could also be about MPs in the same party. Again, the perception of conflict between members of staff was lower than between MPs.

When asked whether MPs in different parties are prepared to share information just over two-fifths (43%) said this was true while well over half (57%) said this was false. However, 62% said it was true that when MPs in different parties collaborate it is effective, with 38% saying it was false.
When asked whether it was true or false that there was very little respect between MPs in different parties, respondents were completely divided with 49% saying it was true and 51% false. Only one-in-three (30%) told us there was very little respect between member staff with 70% saying it was false.

Prioritising long term against short-term

Our survey shows that respondents tend to favour longer term performance and pay-offs over short term. Only one-fifth (21%) told us that short term results should be achieved, even if this means forgoing long-term payoffs. However, 35% disagreed.

Just one-fifth (19%) agreed that they were willing to sacrifice long-term performance for short-term results while two-fifths (41%) disagreed.

Two-fifths (38%) agreed they were willing to sacrifice short-term results for expected long-term payoffs.

Figure 16: To what extent are the following statements true or false? (%)

Figure 17: How do you prioritise your work? (%)
Comparison with microbusinesses

Given the total number of staff within MPs’ offices they can feasibly be described as individual microbusinesses in of themselves, meaning we are able to compare our survey data against UK Working Lives 2021 findings for businesses with 1-9 staff members.

Workload is higher in political offices

We found that the workload of MPs’ staff was considerably higher than in microbusinesses more generally. For example, seven-in-ten (70%) of respondents in microbusinesses told us they usually had enough time to get their work done within allocated hours. This compares with just over two-fifths (43%) of staff working in MPs’ offices who tell us they are able to do so. Only 12% of microbusiness workers disagreed or strongly disagreed, while this number was half (49%) of those working in politics.

Parliamentary staff twice or even three-times more likely to report negative outcomes

There are even more concerning disparities. Political staff are more than twice as likely to tell us that they often or always feel exhausted at work than microbusiness counterparts, with 35% telling us they feel this way compared to just 14% of microbusiness workers.

Furthermore, political staff are three times as likely as microbusiness staff to tell us they always or often feel under excessive pressure at work, with 36% telling us this is the case compared to 12% of microbusiness workers.
Staff in MPs’ offices are exactly three times as likely to report their workload is far too much or too much in a usual week. 54% of those working in offices told us this, compared to 18% in microbusinesses. Only 43% workers in MPs offices reported their workload in a normal week was about right, which is significantly lower than the seven-in-ten (68%) of workers in microbusinesses who told us this is the case.
Impact on mental health significantly worse for Parliamentary staff

Finally, impact on health is a lot more concerning in MPs’ offices than in microbusinesses. Half (51%) of workers in microbusinesses told us that their work has a very positive or positive effect on their mental health, while this figure was just over one-quarter (28%) for those working in politics.

Just 16% of those working in microbusinesses told us their work has a negative impact on their mental health, which is considerably less than the two-fifths (38%) of those working in MPs’ offices.

Figure 21: To what extent does your work positively or negatively affect your mental health (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MPs’ offices</th>
<th>Microbusinesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very positively/positively</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very negatively/negatively</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CIPD/CIP base: 242; GWI base: 1636

Less conflict in microbusinesses

Those people working in microbusinesses that we surveyed in 2019 told us they are considerably less likely to have experienced conflict in the workplace within the past year than those working in MPs’ offices. A quarter of respondents (24%) told us they had experienced conflict within the past year, lower than the third (33%) of those working in political offices.
Conclusions

It is no secret that those working in Westminster and for MPs experience a unique and challenging working environment which is driven by the demands of working on the front line of politics.

Unfortunately it is also a workplace which has generated significant and long-standing concerns over behaviour such as bullying and sexual harassment.

In May this year senior MPs called for a drastic overhaul of Westminster's culture, amid concerns over sexism and inappropriate behaviour by politicians.

It is against this backdrop that the results of this first in-depth survey of the quality of working lives of those working in Parliament must be considered.

It should be emphasised that there are many positive aspects of working for MPs in Westminster, with respondents typically reporting very high levels of motivation, and believing strongly that they have a duty in their role to do their best.

Another encouraging finding was the overall positive relationships between people in management positions and their employees. Respondents to the survey report that relationships between management/line managers or supervisors and their staff within individual offices are generally very good as are relationships between colleagues.

On all these measures, people working for MPs are more positive compared to the averages recorded by CIPD's annual 2021 Good Work Index based on a representative sample of working people across the UK.

However, overall the picture is not nearly so rosy. Respondents from our survey are much more likely than other workers to report having excessive workloads, to have poor work-life balance and to report being under excessive pressure frequently.
People working for MPs also find it much harder than the average UK workers to fulfil commitments outside of work because of the demands of the job and to switch off and relax when they are not working.

Worryingly, the situation is also significantly more negative for women on all these aspects of their working lives. Women report being under excessive pressure more frequently than men, and have much more negative views towards their work-life balance for example.

Another particularly concerning finding from the survey is the negative impact that people’s experience of working for MPs has on their health. They are much more likely than other workers to report that their work has a negative impact on both their physical and mental health. Again women are significantly more likely than men to say that work negatively impacts their physical and mental health.

Against this backdrop it is perhaps not surprising that overall levels of conflict reported by those working in Westminster and for MPs are marginally higher than the average for UK workers.

Overall a third of people working for MPs report they have experienced conflict in the last 12 months. This includes those who have been subjected to discrimination due to a protected characteristic and those that had experienced unwanted attention of a sexual nature.

Respondents working for MPs were significantly more likely than the average UK worker to report being undermined or humiliated in their job and to report having false allegations made against them.

The survey shows the damaging impact of conflict on people’s working relationships and their experience of their working lives more broadly. People who report conflict are more likely to report being miserable at work, say they can’t switch off and relax outside work and are more likely to say their workload is too much.

Concerningly, most incidents of conflict go unresolved. One contributing reason for this is likely to be that a significant minority of respondents were unaware of the support available to them to help resolve workplace issues.

Where support was used the most effective type was an independent HR contact, followed by confidential support and an independent complaints procedure.

Of course the best way of tackling conflict in the workplace is to prevent it and manage it effectively where it does occur so that it can be resolved to prevent it escalating or becoming an engrained problem.

Respondents who have experienced basic HR practices are more likely to report better outcomes in terms of their job quality compared to those who have not had these. There is evidence, for example, to suggest that where people have had a structured induction they are less likely to say work has a negative impact on their mental health and more likely to say they are able to relax outside work. Respondents with a clear and up-to-date job description are more likely to say their workload is about right and less likely to report they feel exhausted often or always.

Of course, the survey can only highlight links between the presence of inductions and job descriptions and more positive attitudes among respondents and cannot show whether they directly cause these outcomes.
However, the presence of these practices is likely to signal working environments which are better managed and the benefits that result from this. This assumption is supported by the finding that the presence of these core HR practices is also associated with the presence of a designated office manager.

**The way forward**

This survey only shines a light on people management and workplace matters rather than more complex issues relating to the wider culture and leadership in politics and within political parties. Nonetheless, there are clear insights for improving working lives for those working for MPs.

It is clear some key basic HR and people management practices have not been adopted by many MPs and managers working in Parliament despite significant evidence of the value of these practices to employees’ job quality.

There is also evidence that where people working in Parliament do experience problems in the workplace, the availability of access to an independent HR adviser is regarded as the most effective form of support.

Consequently there is a strong case to explore how to boost the availability of independent HR support and help MPs to professionalise their approach to managing staff. This could both significantly improve the working experience of those working in Parliament and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the staff MPs rely on to achieve their objectives.

**Response from Compassion in Politics**

This report has highlighted serious problems with the functioning of our political system. It has demonstrated that many MPs and staff experience excessive pressure, conflict, and abuse arising from both the structure (the lack of support, inadequacy of training, and inequalities of power) and culture (the tribalism, presenteeism, and elitism) of their work. Recommendations must therefore address both of these (inter-related) factors.

**Structure**

As has been highlighted by numerous reports and commentaries, the system for employing MP staff is outmoded. The offices of MPs operate like 650 independent businesses without streamlined protocols and minimal accountability. And because of the power dynamics that exist in parliament (many staff are young and naturally concerned not to tar their developing careers) it can be difficult for employees to speak out against malpractice.

While most MPs want to manage their staff in a professional and compassionate manner, there have been too many instances of abuse, harassment, and bullying of staff by MPs to justify the continuation of the current arrangements. That is why we believe it is time to establish an independent Human Resources department to create and manage the recruitment practices of MPs and implement streamlined policies and procedures for their staff’s pay, holiday, promotion, grievances, complaints, training, and development. Just like in any other workplace, individual managers would be able to choose their staff. But just like in any other workplace, they would not get to dictate pay, working hours, promotion prospects, or play judge and jury in disputes. This is about transparency, independence, and professionalisation.

One of the immediate functions of such an HR department should be to create mandatory induction and training for MPs and their staff. This report highlighted that neither group has
received satisfactory training and the training that has been received has been largely procedural. Again, this is simply out of step with any modern workplace where leaders are coached in management, staff trained for progression, and teams facilitated to develop a culture of respect and inclusion. We therefore recommend that management (where appropriate) and equality and diversity training be made compulsory for all MPs and staff and that a supplementary training programme be developed to cultivate their emotional wellbeing and practical skills.

While these developments will go some way toward addressing the power imbalances in our politics, much more needs to be done. That should start with putting the Ministerial Code on a statutory footing so that it is transparent, respected, and - by degrees - independent of the prime minister. It is simply unacceptable that the prime minister should be able to set and mark their own homework and do so in virtual secrecy. The Code must be placed on a firm legal footing and the independent advisor on ministerial interests should be given the power to initiate investigations of wrongdoing by ministers without having to gain the approval of the prime minister. Democracy ought to be about openness and accountability - the current regime has us operating in the shadows.

**Culture**

By changing the systems and structures of political work we can start to change the culture. Training and independent support will help employees to set and uphold new standards. Constructing rules and procedures to be democratic and transparent will signify that these values are important across political life.

But we also believe that additional interventions are necessary to lead a volte-face in the culture of our politics. That is why we are recommending that a deep-dive be conducted to assess how every aspect of our political system - its traditions and practices - influence culture. This could not be more prescient. As we finalise this report the news brings yet another instance of an MP’s repeated unethical behaviour being swept under the carpet. We know that instances of harassment are all-too-common for (especially female) MPs and staff. Illegal parties were held at Downing Street during the Covid crisis and mistruths were propagated about their occurrence in order to avoid public scrutiny. It is not enough to blame bad apples. There is a cultural problem in our politics and we need to understand it. A full investigation into our political culture should look at every angle - language, traditions, rules, norms, and codes - with a simple question in mind: does this make for an inclusive, respectful, and accountable work environment?

Running parallel with such an inquiry we recommend that an annual HR survey - built on the pilot led by the CIPD - should be conducted for MPs and their staff. Once again, this is standard practice in most workplaces but, once again, has never been introduced for parliamentary members and employees. Taking this step would be important for two reasons. Not only will it help parliament's authorities identify, monitor, and address problems in the culture of political work. It will also communicate that the wellbeing and welfare of parliamentary members and staff matters - that they are not just pawns in a larger political game. It will offer a voice through which staff can raise grievances and concerns and ensure that employee ideas are given a platform for exploration and debate.

While these recommendations aim at transforming the practices and culture of life inside parliamentary and constituency offices there is an external issue that must be addressed: the expectations that are set by our leaders. We urgently need those leaders to come together and agree a plan of action to root out malpractice in politics. This should start with a simple statement: that unethical and unprofessional behaviour will not be tolerated. A page
needs to be turned and new expectations set. Beyond that we need to look at the language of politics: how can leaders set the terms for an inclusive (as opposed to divisive), compassionate (rather than antagonistic), and constructive political debate. And it should involve a commitment to review their own staffing and volunteer practices to ensure they meet the standards of a modern and professional workplace. While our report confined itself to MPs and their staff, there is undoubtedly a cross-fertilisation of culture with other areas of political life and we need to ensure that they too promote and uphold high standards.

Recommendations:

1. Establish an independent Human Resources department to create and manage the recruitment practices of MPs and implement streamlined policies and procedures for their staff’s pay, holiday, promotion, grievances, complaints, training, and development. While MPs should retain the power to choose their staff, all other HR functions should sit with an independent HR body.

2. Introduce mandatory induction programmes for staff and MPs. The initial training modules should include as standard: the rights and responsibilities of staff and MPs, equality and diversity training, and management training (where appropriate). Subsidiary training for staff and MPs should go beyond the current focus on media and procedural training to include compassion (for self and others), conflict resolution, and bridge-building.

3. Update the Ministerial and Members Codes so that they are underpinned by the Nolan Principles of public life and placed on a statutory footing.

4. Conduct an annual survey of MPs and their staff to understand if progress is being made on improving their respective working conditions and relationships and to highlight areas for concern and attention.

5. Conduct an in depth review of all work practices that might directly or indirectly contribute to an environment where bullying has become entrenched.